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ABSTRACT

A number of methodological and substantive issues were raised by the ethnographic research for the book (coauthored by the author of this paper), "Teaching Tales and Theories: A Story and A Commentary on a Science Classroom" (1981). First, the origin of the "problem" came not only from earlier research but also from a serendipitous meeting with the other future coauthor, a high school science teacher. Another methodological problem involved the large volume of data generated by ethnographically following one teacher's class through one full semester; data collection included recording all verbal statements in the class, recording teacher comments before and after class, and taking field notes in all the classes. The research yielded, however, substantive steps toward a theory of teaching, involving concrete images about teacher-directed laboratory instruction in general science and the teacher's use of metaphors in thinking about teaching. Further research problems arose in getting the project finished: not only the coauthors' separate personal lives, but also the ethnographic method's demand for "grounded theory," complicated the analyzing, conceptualizing, and writing up the project. However, the ethnographic method also provided a collaborative relationship that led to other research opportunities and further insights on teaching. (RW)

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Teaching Tales and Theories:
An Ethnographic Next Step?

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1. Introduction

The concepts of ethnography and educational ethnography, I believe, are in considerable flux and ferment these days. Even the more classical statements: Malinowski's "Introduction: the subject, method, and scope of this inquiry" to the Argonauts of the Western Pacific (1922), Whyte's "Appendix" to Streetcorner Society and more recently Geertz' well received "thick description" which introduces his The Interpretation of Cultures give very different instructions and directions to the field worker. The differences vary across data collection, analytical and interpretive models, and even more basic world views, root metaphors or metatheoretical stances. The state of affairs is even more exciting, if not chaotic, in what has been coming to be known as educational ethnography. Here the literature contains such fascinating labels as anthroethnography, blitz krieg ethnography, constitutive ethnography, contract ethnography, focused ethnography, micro ethnography, neo ethnography, psytho ethnography, plus a dozen more variants.[1]

If this kind of bubbling excitement exists more generally and if this symposium is about "ethnographic adaptations: new perspectives in educational research" then it seems reasonable to present in some detail and with as great a clarity as possible a particular piece of what we think is ethnographic research. Part of the reasonableness lies in the gradual evolution of scientific concepts if not a more fundamental paradigmatic revolution. With these introductory thoughts I'd like to tell

[1]This argument appears in more detail in Smith (1982)

you about a high school science teacher, Pat Brock, her Science I class, and our book, Teaching Tales and Theories: A Story and a Commentary on a Science Classroom, which CEMREL, Inc. has just published. My half dozen comments fall reasonably easily into two or three methodological issues and two or three substantive issues.

2. Methodological and Substantive Issues

2.1 Origin (and Evolution) of "The Problem"

In our experience "the problem" whether in its statement, its origin, or its evolution is one of the most fascinating and varied parts of ethnographic research. For us words like "accidents, anomalies, and serendipity" are critical for understanding the genesis of "the problem" (Smith, 1981). In this instance, our research problem arose this way. Geoffrey and I were finishing a study of his class in an urban elementary school. In that we had been much concerned with the dynamics of the social relationships between the teacher and the youngsters. Now I was concerned about finding another setting where we could explore more fully some of the intellectual aspects of the classroom. Literally, one day I was shopping in a local super market and I ran into a former student from a night school Educational Psychology class, who was a teacher in a suburban high school. We started to chat. I told her a bit about the earlier work, The Complexities of an Urban Classroom, and she told me a bit about the junior high science curriculum and set of texts she was writing. One thing led to another and the reasonableness of some kind of joint effort was settled in principle while blocking an aisle in the supermarket.

The evolution of the problem and its final form as a book, Teaching Tales and Theories, intertwines with several other key points I want to make; consequently, I return to it later.

2.2 Kinds of Data Sought

In a fundamental sense, Teaching Tales was to be a sequel to Complexities, but a sequel with some critical variants. First, the potency of a semester long analysis to catch the ebb and flow of classroom processes remained so we went for the total semester of Science I. The high school setting had some time benefits--instead of all day, every day, all semester, it became first hour, every day, all semester. This eased the time pressures considerably, but it also meant we lost some of the broader realities of the full day of teaching and the impact of these on the single period. Thankfully, in retrospect, Pat kept dragging the rest of the day into her notes.

Second, because we felt that the intellectual life would move too rapidly for field notes alone, and because we wanted to come to grips with the then dominant quantitative modes of classroom analysis--Ned Flanders, Hilda Taba, Bunee Smith, etal we decided to tape record all the verbal statements in the class with a lavalier mike on the teacher and two microphones in the class all running into a mixer and then a recorder. The horrendous job of converting this into protocol typescripts of four inch lines fell upon Pat Carpentar, our secretary and assistant at CEMREL. The magnitude of this task, the amount of resulting pages of product, and the difficulties of grappling with these data was as bad an estimate as we have ever made.

The third strand of data was a brief pre and post class set of notes that Pat dictated daily. Our interest here, as captured in the project's original title "Teacher Plans and Classroom Interaction", was to attack the problems of the cognitive processes of the teacher, an outgrowth of our earlier concerns with teacher decision-making. Originally we had hoped that pre and post ideas would be interviews and discussions between us but her schedule was such that her first three periods were three sections of Science I. The compromise was a brief set of pre class plans and later in the day reflections on how things went and their similarities and differences from her intentions. One of the unanticipated benefits of this was that Pat would often contrast the first hour with second and third hours and often include other items from her teaching day which impinged on her and the class.

The fourth strand of data were my field notes as I sat in class, monitored the mixer and recorder, thought about what was going on, and held brief conversations before, during, and after class with Pat, the youngsters, and her colleagues in the science department and other parts of the high school.

All in all an awesome array and amount of data interrelated with a set of problems, hunches, and assumptions.

2.3 Substantive Steps Toward A Theory of Teaching

Some years ago, we thought we were into a general theory of teaching. Later we began to expand the delusion more grandiosely into a theory of schooling or a theory of education. This way of describing "one's problem" has been useful in integrating our manifestly disparate

ethnographic efforts. As I look at our Teaching Tales and Theories effort we have made substantial progress with several key conceptions. Perhaps most fundamentally we have an extended, beautiful set of images of teacher directed "laboratory curriculum and instruction" in general science. In great detail we trace out phases such as "pre lab, lab, and post lab." Because most, although not all, of the materials and equipment are readily avilable, even for a school with limited budget and resources, we have an image of what Pat calls "kitchen science." Further, we develop the necessarily related concept of "mopping up" her word for a mixture of finishing up and reviewing. Finally we have a view of evaluation and grading in a laboratory curriculum. These concrete, systemic images we believe are important for teacher education programs, both preservice and inservice.

Running through our account is the intriguing issue of "metaphors and teacher thought processes." Pat is a chemist by training and an ecologist by interest and avocation. Her head is full of scientific concepts used metaphorically: classroom chemistry, catalyst, ecological pyramids, trophic levels, predators, etc. She uses these terms metaphorically to help her think about what happens in the interpersonal relationships in her class, a domain that usually is said to belong to sociology, psychology, and the social sciences. Her thinking processes turn out to be a very powerful mix of scientific concepts used as metaphors, common sense concepts, educational concepts, and social science concepts all focusing on the problems of teaching. This raises for me a fascinating set of problems for the context of theory of teaching and the role of metaphors in a theory of teaching. Do teachers from other

disciplines--artists, literary critics,[2] preachers, priests and rabbis, and other social scientists such as historians and political scientists, do the same?

In addition we raise at some length the concept of "givens", those parameters of a teaching setting which, though often personally or socially constructed, may not be easy to change. Because we happened to be there the year computerized flexible scheduling was introduced we presented a view of the unanticipated consequences of a school-wide innovation that became a difficult given in Pat's life.

2.4 Problems in Getting the Project Finished

Initially, I wanted to talk here about the specific substantive issues in analyzing, conceptualizing, and writing up the project. But that got immensely complicated by our individual research and career serials. That concept, serial, is an important one. It comes from Henry Murray's conception of long units in personality and personality theory. Briefly, Pat was caught in being a full time teacher with all the multiple time commitments that that implies. Secondly, we had only limited resources for summer salaries. Thirdly, as I mentioned, she was in the middle of the writing, trials, rewriting, and editing of her jointly authored texts, Patterns and Processes of Science, which Heath was to publish. Fourth, she continued to try to maintain some sanity with a vast array of hobbies, arts and crafts, handwork, and so forth.

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[2] Eisner's (1975) connoisseurship and educational criticism seem important instances here. Ortony (1979) has recently edited a major set of papers entitled Metaphor and Thought.

And fifth, somewhere along the way she also got married. All and all a pretty full agenda, but even so, the problems in getting finished were really more mine than hers.

Rather than castigating myself, as worthy and as appropriate as such an effort might be, I'd really like to put the blame on ethnographic method, or at least a couple of hypotheses about the method, or perhaps the way we practice the method. First, we have a strong commitment to the Glaser and Strauss position on "the discovery of grounded theory." The method keeps demanding and pulling the best of our creativity. Fascinating problems come faster than we can process them. For instance out of Complexities came almost simultaneously, this Teaching Tales and Themes project with Pat, but also a student teaching project with Bill Connor (Connor and Smith, 1968). The key idea there arose from watching a City Teachers' College student in a "two by two" program--two weeks in Kindergarten, two in first grade, two in second grade, and so on through the eighth grade, a major difference in professional socialization from the Washington University pattern. Our being impressed with the faculty peer group's influence on Geoffrey made me jump at the opportunity to study a group of teachers coming together for the first time in our innovative school. Anatomy of Education Innovation was the result. Finally, Paul Kleine and I were trying to approach more quantitatively the problem of verifying some of the hypotheses in Complexities. Our Minor Studies in Teacher-Pupil Relationships (1968) and our Teacher Awareness (1969) study grew out of this. As I look back on that, it was an insane agenda, but even now I'm not sure how I would remake those decisions. Perhaps someone investigating research serials will find answers to those dilemmas. All I know

is that they were all partly concurrent and partly phased--data collecting on one, analyses and initial writing on another, final writing or revising for publication on another. Among other things, they kept creating problems in getting any one finished. Teaching Tales fell victim here.

In part, a number of our projects have had a timely quality, you do them now or the opportunity passes and you can't do them at all. Sometimes it's because a group of educators are beginning or ending a particular effort, sometimes a larger cooperative effort of which your study will be a part is ready now, and sometimes the funding is available now and won't be later. Perhaps the important question is how does one say no to interesting ideas, friends, and organizations?

2.5 Collaborative Relationships

For me, one of the most unusual and important aspects of ethnographic research, and one well illustrated by the work represented in Teaching Tales is its consequences on one's professional relationships. I have time only to open the issue by reference to several significant items. First, one's professional life merges with one's personal life. Over the years, Pat and I have become good friends. With our spouses we party together, we trade stories on gardening (she has a wondrous patch of red rasberries), on trapping squirrels (she told me about the incredibly effective Have-A-Heart trap), on traveling (the joys of New Harmony, Indiana and Shakertown, Kentucky), and on handiwork (spinning, weaving, knitting, and needlepoint).

On more strictly professional issues, she's one of several public school teachers who "keep me honest" about issues of schooling, teaching, and educating. We trade references and ideas from various journals such as Science which I don't read regularly and items of educational research, philosophy, and curriculum which she might have missed. She was partly responsible for my being on the North Central Evaluation team when her high school was up for review. Perhaps even more critically, when we did one of the case studies for Stake and Easley's NSF study of Science Education she was very helpful for she knew most of the science teachers in Alte, (Smith, 1977) the district we studied, she helped me gain access, and she talked with me at great length about the results. One of the key ideas in that analysis was "teacher staleness", a less dramatic form of what is called more generally these days "burnout." In thinking through a number of antecedents to the prevention and remediation of staleness, Pat commented on the importance of aspects of our work for her—involvement in self selected projects, overlapping of life interests and teaching assignments, and university activity. These ideas found their way into that report.

Insert Figure 1 About Here

But to return to our project collaboration for the moment: as we tried a number of starts and false starts (e.g. Go, Bug, Go: Methodological Issues in Classroom Observational Research, (Smith and Brock, 1970) and a Fulbright Sabbatical to New Zealand which was supposed to help finish it) we finally settled on a working format that produced the book. Pat wrote initial drafts of the narrative of the semester, I did

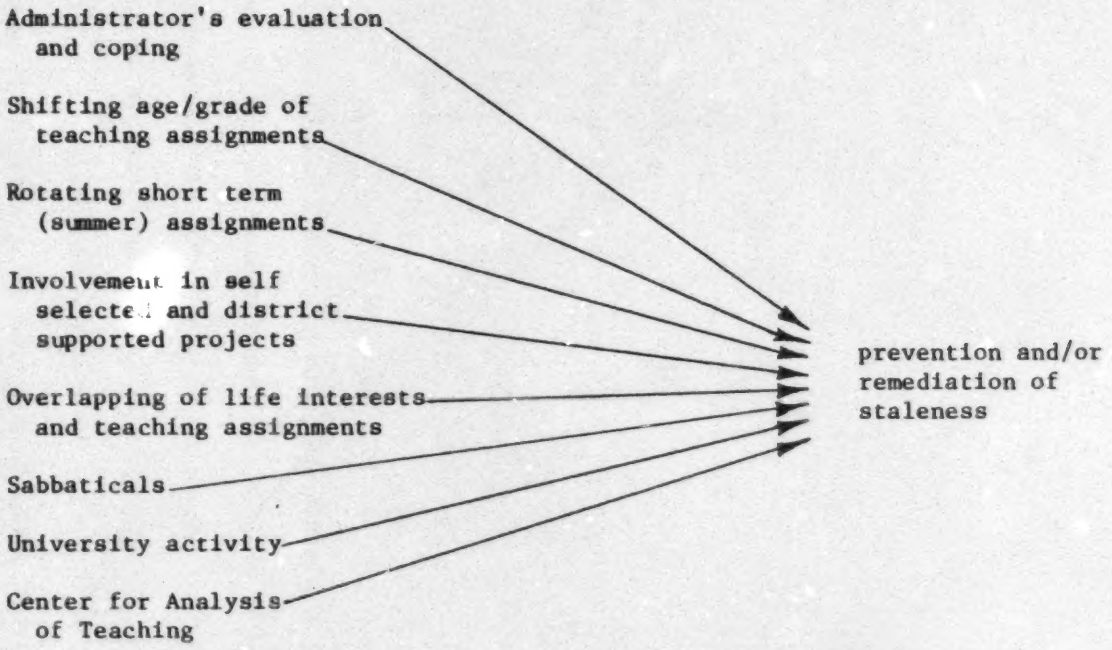
Administrator's evaluation and coping
Shifting age/grade of teaching assignments
Rotating short term (summer) assignments
Involvement in self selected and district supported projects
Overlapping of life interests and teaching assignments
Sabbaticals
University activity
Center for Analysis of Teaching
prevention and/or remediation of staleness

Figure 1: Preventing and Remediating Staleness

(From Smith, 1978)

some editing and focusing of these, and I began to react to the ideas. Finally we had our model, a chronological sequence of vignettes each followed by one or more commentaries by me--pithy paragrphas was her label. On occasion she would comment on the commentary. We both found the process provocative yet functional. Also, the product seems unique, a narrative and commentaries, Teaching Tales and Theories, if you like, produced collaboratively by a high school science teacher and a University educational researcher.

These days, a number of people are describing and building taxonomies of the relationships one has with one's "subjects/clients/colleagues". Words like democratic, bureaucratic, autocratic, aesthetic keep arising (MacDonald, 1974, Smith, Prunty and Dwyer, 1981). These abstractions pale when I think of the particulars in the long term relationship Pat and I have had.

3. Conclusion

Mostly, I've tried to capture several key ideas, "ethnographic adaptations", in the context of ferment in educational ethnography and of one particular project that has threaded its way through my life for a number of years. As you think about your work in ethnography I would urge you to reflect on: 1) the origin and evolution of the field study problems, 2) the interplay between the problem, your multiple intentions and the strands of data you generate, 3) the problems in getting a project finished--particularly how you decide to do X and Y and say "no" to Z, which arise out of any one effort, 4) the nature of your ultimate goal(s)--improving practice, developing a series of complex images of

all phases of schooling or perhaps a synthesis, a theory of education or schooling, and 5) the place of professional collaboration and relationships in the kind of life you want to lead. Our work in Teaching Tales has carried these multiple meanings for us.

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